

## Civil War Book Review

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### Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War

Stephen Rockenbach

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## Review

Rockenbach, Stephen

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**Williams, David** *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*. The New Press, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9781595581082

### Unity or Disunity in the American South

Perhaps one of the most intriguing debates for students and scholars of the Civil War deals with the explanation for Confederate defeat and Union victory. While some historians have attributed the Confederacy's failure to win independence to defeat on the battlefield, a growing number of scholars have pointed to social divisions within the South as a contributing factor to Confederate failure. Even the *name* of the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy has become part of the debate, interjecting irony when some Civil War enthusiasts talk about the war. For example, at a 2008 historical reenactment in Virginia, a museum volunteer explained to visitors that the "Civil War" should more correctly be called the "War Between the States," and then proudly stated that the museum was now officially listed as a stop on Virginia's "Civil War Trail." David Williams's *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* provides much-needed support for those who contend that the war was not simply between states, and not confined only to the battlefield. Readers of Williams's book may be tempted to add "War Within the States" to the list of alternate names for the Civil War. David Williams demonstrates that the war in the South was truly a civil war, in which Unionist and Confederate southerners struggled against one another, often resulting in community-level violence as brutal as that of any battle.

David Williams has authored several influential books on the Civil War, including *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom* (2005). In his latest accomplishment, he presents an impressive collection of stories and quotations that reveal cracks and crevices in the façade of Confederate unity dating from early 1861 until the critical last year of the war. He draws his evidence from both published monographs and firsthand accounts,

creating an effective synthesis of the Confederacy's internal conflicts. *Bitterly Divided* blends the results of recent regional and community studies (including Williams's own published works) to create a solid explanation for how the divisions within the Confederacy resulted in ultimate defeat. Some scholars have previously critiqued many of these local studies as only representative of a single locality and limited in application to the entire South. But Williams draws all of these studies together and allows us to see the "big picture" of dissent and conflict within the Confederate States. The strength of Williams's book is its attention to the experiences of people who have been neglected by historians occupied with military strategy and leadership. Williams gives center stage to the experiences of African-Americans, Native-Americans, non-slaveholding whites, southern Unionists, and other common folk often ignored in favor of the planters and southern elite. Further, Williams gives attention to both the upper and lower South, along with the eastern and western portions of the Confederacy.

The Confederacy suffered from the varying motivations of its supporters and the disdain of southerners who saw little benefit in secession and war. Williams unveils a Confederacy divided between the haves and the have-nots, where secession was voted in through coercion and even deception. The nature of the South's slave society had necessitated control of both black slaves and poor white southerners. Williams offers sufficient evidence to shake the foundations of the lingering assumption that common southerners, and even slaves, supported the Confederacy out of some abstract sense of loyalty or nascent nationalism. Additionally, the accounts of slave resistance, newspaper articles noting continued Unionism after secession, and the threats of violence towards those who opposed secession give heft to the conclusion that the Confederacy was disadvantaged from the start. Williams also details how class conflict affected the war effort. The best example is the twenty-slave law, which allowed planters an exemption from the draft, while those who owned fewer or no slaves still faced the possibility of service in the Confederate army. Williams shows that planters pushed the advantages of their social status further by growing highly demanded crops like cotton and tobacco (and even smuggling these crops to northern markets), while ignoring the Confederate government's requests that planters grow less cotton and more food. Women were the main participants in the struggle for subsistence in the South, leading occasional uprisings (such as the infamous 1863 "Bread Riot" in Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy) and several armed robberies of stores and freight wagons for

provisions for their families.

Williams mixes well-known figures and events with the more obscure tales of common southerners who resisted the war, and often paid a devastating price for their actions. The book is filled with sobering accounts of violence, much of it perpetrated by the Confederate home guard against southern Unionists, draft resisters, and deserters. Accounts of unruly home guards reveling in torture and killing might conjure up several scenes from the film *Cold Mountain*, but Williams adds a less-familiar dimension. Southern unionists and anti-Confederates were not always victims; they sometimes organized, forming secret societies and occasionally mustering enough firepower to hold Confederate authorities at bay.

Williams should be praised for looking at the entire South and striving to depict the perspective of various southerners, including African Americans, both free and enslaved. Contrary to the Lost Cause myth of the loyal slave, Williams uses examples and quotes that prove that black southerners understood very well the meaning of the war and that Union victory would bring slaves closer to freedom. However, all slaves were not content to wait for freedom; some took every opportunity to resist by attacking their white masters or committing arson. The most common acts of rebellion among slaves were aiding Unionists and running away toward Union lines. Williams notes several occasions when white and black southerners cooperated in opposing the war. This racial and class tension combined to haunt every waking hour of slaveholding white southerners' existence. Although the cooperation between anti-Confederate white and black southerners does not denote racial harmony, Williams does contend that it shows how much some common white southerners resented their slaveholding neighbors who supported the Confederacy.

Western Indians were also very conflicted in their reaction to the Confederacy. Williams mentions that existing divisions among tribes, including the Cherokee, further complicated the decision of some Native American leaders to ally with the Confederacy. Many pure-blooded Indians and non-slaveholding Indians initially followed their leaders into the Confederate camp. However, a lack of support from the Confederate government caused some Indians to shift their support to the Union. Much like common southern whites, pro-Confederate Indians hoped that supporting the Confederacy would bring them independence, only to find that the burdens of war forced them to choose between supporting the Confederacy and providing for their families.

*Bitterly Divided* is an engaging read, full of interesting stories about common southerners, including some of Williams's own ancestors. This personal connection to the common folk of the Confederacy explains Williams's ability to let southerners speak for themselves, as opposed to making generalizations while hiding the real people in the endnotes. Williams's extensive use of quotations and annotated illustrations makes this book a significant synthesis of recent research, directed toward readers wishing to expand their understanding of the Civil War beyond the usual battlefield accounts. Historians who disagree with Williams's conclusion that the Confederate war effort crumbled from within will have to wrestle with the wide array of evidence contained in this book. As Williams explains in his final chapter, proponents of the Lost Cause (many of whom were planters and former Confederate officers) built a new memory of the war that hid the internal divisions and explained away the social dynamics that caused the Confederate war effort to crumble. This manufactured memory of the war is perpetuated whenever someone refers to the "War Between the States," ignoring the social and economic divisions all wars exacerbate. Some of the incidents of the Confederacy's inner civil war were so brutal, that it is almost understandable why many southerners were eager to forget them. For example, Williams documents the execution of a suspected Union man by Mississippi secessionists, who decided that scalding the man to death with hot water in front of his family, and hanging his body from a tree, was suitable punishment. Actions like these defined the South's inner civil war, and while this struggle was on a smaller scale than the battles against the Union, it was a notable civil war that the Confederacy could not afford to fight.

*Stephen Rockenbach is an assistant professor of history at Virginia State University, Petersburg, Virginia.*